

Ambassador Shari Villarosa
Introductory Remarks on International Women's Day
Thursday, March 6, 18:30pm

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to welcome you here today in celebration of the 103rd annual International Women's Day. We have found an impressive speaker who can help inspire us to do something about the terrible scourge of domestic violence that we have read about recently. Natacha Henry is a writer, lecturer and broadcaster, who has worked for nearly 20 years to end the silence surrounding all types of gender-based discrimination, in France and around the world.

International Women's Day, since its founding XX years ago, has championed women's right to vote and hold public office, and ending discrimination in the workplace. Women around the world have made considerable progress towards gender equality, but challenges remain and we must continue to seek to improve the condition of women worldwide.

For 2014, we think it important to call for an end to domestic violence against women. Here in Mauritius, in the United States, and across the globe, we must break the silence and combine our resources so we can end this terrible scourge.

I know that you are well aware of this. Not a week has passed without newspaper headlines reminding us that for so many women in Mauritius, home is not a place of refuge, but a place of abuse – even of death. Lurid tales of crimes of passion and jilted lovers should not be viewed as entertainment, but rather tragically long and complex personal histories of dependence, isolation, criticism, humiliation, intimidation and escalating violence.

Many people seem to think that this is a new problem caused by modern life. Sadly domestic abuse has thrived for centuries, hidden by silence and shame. All too often, the emotional and physical abuse of domestic violence has been considered a private matter and not seen by friends, family, neighbors, or the authorities as a crime. Recent surveys in Mauritius show that nearly one in four women have experienced severely abusive behavior of a physical, sexual or emotional nature from an intimate partner at some time in their lives. Because of the silence, people don't know what to think or do when faced with a women suffering from domestic violence. Most victims fail to report abuse because of embarrassment or their fear of having no place to go and no one to turn to for help.

For me, the increased press attention is good news by breaking this deadly culture of silence.

I have read the terrible reports and opinion pieces with great interest. There are many good suggestions and some that do not make much sense to me. But it does not matter what I think, what matters is that Mauritians are now talking about a grave societal problem and searching for solutions. Mauritians recognize the need to change traditional views, develop greater respect for women, improve legal protections so victims can come forward, confident that places exist where they will be treated professionally, sensitively, and seriously. Changing attitudes can take many years. In the meantime, it must be easier for victims to report crimes, it must be clear where victims can find refuge, and perpetrators of violence must know they will be held accountable for their crimes.

We can only achieve this by working together. In the United States we have seen major reductions in domestic violence through public and private funding of emergency services and

shelters; through proper staffing and training of emergency, police and legal responders; through the implementation of sensible legal processes; through large scale anti-violence media campaigns; and more than anything – through the cooperation and teamwork of committed women's groups, shelters, police, media, law and government bodies—to let victims know that they no longer must suffer alone.

We have invited you as representatives of various groups to consider how we can come together to achieve the common aim of ending violence against women. The U.S. Embassy has worked with so many of you on this issue in the past – groups like Women in Networking, SOS Femmes, Chrysalide, the Ministry of Gender Equality, the IJLS, the police, the press and many more - and we want to expand that work in the coming months and years so that women know they can be protected.

Natacha Henry will discuss her animated films, now translated into 9 languages, that help migrant women in France understand what abuse is and how they can seek help in an unfamiliar system. She is also the author of seven books including her 2010 release on domestic violence, "To hit is not to love."

She will talk about why and how these projects came into being and, I hope, inspire similar efforts here in Mauritius so all members of society understand that the crime of domestic violence will no longer be tolerated and no woman must suffer in silence. Please join me in welcoming Natacha Henry.